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# CHRISTIANITY AS RELIGION MADE MORAL

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The most characteristic phases of religion are (1) a definite attitude of dependence upon a superhuman Power for help and deliverance in some crisis in which human values, actual or ideally possible, seem to be threatened; (2) the experience, in certain cases, of the desired deliverance; and (3) the satisfied and grateful contemplation of the superhuman Reality believed to have been the source of the deliverance.

It often happens, however, that the desired deliverance does not come. In time, doubt and criticism are the inevitable result; a rational explanation of the failure of the religious attitude, when it does fail, is demanded. Practical religion, religion which seeks definite experiential results of the religious attitude, must submit to rationalization. The great question is whether it is to be rationalized out of existence, or rationalized into a final, universally valid, scientific form. Can religion remain practical and vital, while developing, along with other human interests and activities, in rationality?

It is worth noting, in connection with this question, that there is one species of practical value which the demand for rationality in religion seems to leave unimpaired, viz., morality. Definite, persistent, and self-abandoning dependence upon the religious Object with a view to moral renovation and power for service does not fail to bring

results. At first religion was used as a means of promoting any value appreciated, but more and more it is being concentrated upon moral ends. Morality is a content of religion to which there can be no rational objection, and there is good ground for the hope that, by becoming ever more truly moral in its ends and in the ways and means of reaching those ends, religion may conserve and even increase its vitality, so that it cannot be rationalized out of existence, but only into higher and more universally acceptable forms.

As we look over the history of religion we find that, in spite of the often disintegrating influence of rational criticism upon traditional religious belief and practice, there are certain products of the religious spirit which appear to be able to withstand the influence of this sometimes greatly dreaded "destructive criticism." Not all religious revolution is merely, or even mainly, negative in its outcome. Not infrequently rational renunciation of the inadequate in religion has been accompanied and even facilitated by the production, as a substitute, of religious contents more fully compatible with the newer and more critical modes of thought and action. The failure of materialistic religion has been interpreted as due to moral delinquencies on the part of the petitioner; moral ends are accordingly sought in religion, at first as a necessary

precondition of material blessings, but finally with the understanding that to create a clean heart, to renew a right spirit, is the true function of religion. Non-moral ceremonies of riddance, too, and even immoral mystery-religions become moral, when the public conscience demands it, and a powerful means of promoting morality. But most commonly, perhaps, the moral revolution in religion has emanated from some great moral personality, as the history of religion abundantly shows.

Conspicuous above all others among the prophets of moral religion is Jesus of Nazareth. Original Christianity, we would maintain, was, in its innermost core and essence, *religion*, made more moral and, therefore, potentially more rational, by the introduction into it, actually and in its tradition, of the moral personality of this matchless spiritual leader. At the same time it was *morality*, made more religious and, therefore, more vital, by the carrying into it of the dynamic of the morally renovated religion of Jesus, a religion whose experience was that of spiritual communion and active fellowship with the divine Father, cultivated not only as an end in itself, but as a means to the completest self-giving in ministering to the deepest needs of the human brother. Essential Christianity is, for the modern, rational, reality-loving spirit, *the religion and morality of Jesus*, clothed in the concepts of a scientific age. It cannot even be the religion of the gospel *about* Jesus, unless that gospel about Jesus is interpreted in the spirit of the religion of Jesus. It is at once morality made religious and religion made moral.

Essential Christianity, then, i.e., Christianity in the form in which it can still be the vital religion of the scientifically minded man, is, whatever else it may be, religion made moral. Not only is religion made moral that which is most vital in rational religion and that which is most rational in vital religion; it is also that which is most Christian in historic and present-day Christianity. That this is so, that the essence of Christianity, as religion, can be stated in terms of religion made moral (provided we use this term "moral" in the essentially Christian sense, according to which moral value is everywhere an absolute value), is supported by a consideration of what have come and are today increasingly coming to be regarded as the Christian conception of God, the Christian experience of salvation, the Christian sense of the value of prayer, and the Christian hope of eternal life.

First as to the *Christian conception of God*. It is often said in these days of psychology "Man makes God in his own image." This statement cannot be regarded as literally true save from the point of view of atheism. But it is true that man makes his God-idea and that he tends to make it in his own image. Xenophanes was right. "If oxen and lions had hands, and could paint with their hands and fashion images, as men do, they would make the pictures and images of their gods in their own likeness; horses would make them like horses, oxen like oxen." Often the natural desires and dispositions of men, but always at any rate their ideals, are reflected in their ideas of the Object of religious dependence

and adoration. We have but to think of Zeus and Apollo, of Mars and Venus, of Rama and Krishna. The chief trouble with the God-idea of Mohammed and his followers is that it is made too much in the image of Mohammed—arbitrary, unreasonably severe in punishment, impulsively merciful.

The Christian God-idea, as we now have it at any rate, is made in the image of Christ. There are two varieties of Christianity at this point: in the one Christ is worshiped as God; in the other the religious Object is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." But, religiously speaking, the Christianity of the deified Jesus and the Christianity of the Christlike God are largely the same. Both have found the same sort of God—the same God, indeed—and have found him in the same place, viz., revealed in the person and work of Christ.

"Your Father in heaven is perfect." Perfect, that is, from the point of view of Jesus. The only God whom Jesus could worship, the only God of whom he could be the prophet, must needs be morally perfect, judged by the standards of Jesus himself. And the essentially Christian conception of God today is that of the adequate Object of religious dependence and adoration, sufficient, not only in power and wisdom, but also in character, being the realization of the personal moral ideal of Jesus.

If it be remarked, with Professor Simmel, of Berlin, that we know well enough *what* God is, viz., the unity of all spiritual ideals, but that we can never know *that* God is, the answer is that it is true enough that, apart from religious experience, we cannot know that God is.

As for Jesus, so for Christianity as essentially identical with the religion of Jesus, the existence of God is not a mere matter of traditional teaching or of speculative belief, nor is it a *mere* practical postulate; it is a *verified* experiential judgment. Jesus could not have recognized any other God than the morally perfect Father. If he had not found such a God, if his spiritual experience had failed to provide verification of his belief in a perfect God, he would have had to do without any God; for Jesus, it was a perfect God, or none. And it is of unending significance to the race that a man who demanded so much, morally, of the Object of his religious dependence was not obliged to be an atheist. (The New England theology collapsed, as someone has remarked, because the God who could damn men for his own glory was too immoral a being to be worshiped by a man who could set so severe a moral standard for himself as that he ought to be willing to be damned for the glory of God. The time has come, indeed, when, to the Christian *moral* consciousness, atheism would be a view more acceptable than Calvinism in its more extreme form.)

Christianity, then, as religion made moral, includes the verifiable faith that the perfect God exists, and that not, as Professor Howison would have it, as "the final cause of everything and the efficient cause of nothing," but as the ultimate efficient cause of the spiritual evolution of man, and of the spiritual redemption of sinful men accomplished through Christ, and immanently active as the Holy Spirit in the Christlike everywhere.

That in essential Christianity religion has been made moral is seen in the *Christian experience of salvation*. Practical religion centers in the experience of deliverance from evil, actual or possible, through dependence upon God. This deliverance is not primarily an emotion, but a change of relationships. The prayer "Deliver us from evil" means neither more nor less than "Save us." Salvation is deliverance from evil. In primitive religion the "evil" was chiefly physical and belonging to the present life. Later it came to be chiefly eschatological, although still mainly physical. But in spiritual religion the evil from which deliverance is sought is chiefly moral, and thus primarily belonging to the present life, even if also presumably eschatological.

Interpreting salvation, then, as deliverance from moral evil, it may truly be said that Jesus was saved. He was not saved from physical evil; "himself he could not save." But he was saved from moral evil, by prevention and development, we take it, rather than by cure. Thus especially does he become to us Christians "the Captain of *our* salvation." Through the religious and moral ministry of the Christ, perpetuated in the Christian community at its best, the individual is saved, delivered from moral evil, often primarily by way of cure ("redemption," interpreted as inward, experiential, moral), but ultimately also by way of prevention and further development in positive good. Thus Christian experience of moral salvation is not reserved exclusively for another life; it is a present, progressive deliverance, which may well be expected to continue beyond the confines of this life.

From this point of view of Christianity made moral, with its interpretation of the Christian experience of salvation as moral deliverance through religious dependence, the old-fashioned evangelical question, "Are you saved?" while a very wholesome one for a person to put to himself, is not one that can ordinarily be well answered quite so glibly as was formerly deemed desirable. From what specific moral evils of character and conduct has the Christian been saved? And to what extent has the "good work" been accomplished? And, especially in these days of awakening social conscience, to what extent *can* the individual be saved, morally as well as in other respects, so long as multitudes of his fellows are in wretchedness and sin?

The result of making religion fundamentally moral is seen in the essentially *Christian sense of the value of prayer*, as being moral, as well as religious. Probably no one has ever experienced so fully the value of prayer as did Jesus, and by word and example he has given us some very remarkable teaching on this subject. The central problem in the philosophy of prayer has not been with regard to confession, or thanksgiving, or adoration, but with regard to what is commonly called petition. The term is not a good one; it suggests a relation of man to God which is altogether too external. But it is with reference to this question of prayer and its answer that the word and example of Jesus are most instructive.

In the first place, it may be said that according to Jesus we are never justified in more than *conditional* prayer for *relative* values. "Your Father knoweth

what things ye have need of." "Use not *vain* repetitions"; insistently asking for this or that material "blessing," which, is of but doubtful or relative value, is *in vain*. Be anxious only to be effective for human welfare; "seek first the Kingdom of God," and the question as to what *things* you are to get may be left largely to take care of itself. To be sure, in the "daily bread" petition there is recognition of man's physical dependence; but the only physical desire explicitly sanctioned in the Lord's Prayer is the desire for the absolute minimum of physical goods necessary to sustain life. The petition is thus practically the honest expression to God of the desire to continue to live, which is not only morally legitimate but imperative, in view of life's opportunities for moral growth and service. But, when so interpreted, it is greatly illuminated by the story of how Jesus himself prayed in Gethsemane. He expressed his "soul's sincere desire" for continued life, we are told; but this, we are sure, was not for the mere sake of living, but in order that his ministry to humanity might be continued. And yet even this prayer for life itself was, according to tradition, expressly conditional. In view of the possibility of increasing absolute values on condition of the further continuation of one's own life, it is a duty to seek to live, "if it be possible" without loss of moral integrity. "Nevertheless," in view of the possibility of a life beyond physical death, and the consequently merely relative character of *all* physical values, even the most fundamental of all, the value of physical life, "not as I will, but as Thou wilt" becomes, in such situations as

Jesus confronted, the appropriate expression of enlightened moral religion.

We would repeat, then, that in the religion of Jesus, as in essential Christianity as religion made moral, it is felt to be not morally right to offer unconditional petition for what we do not know to be an absolute value. But the world-view of Jesus was, it is well to remember, like that of his contemporaries, pre-scientific. What then is the meaning of the prayer "Thy will be done" when translated into our modern world-view? Is it not, so far as concerns events or matters with which the will of the petitioner has, or can have, by means of any actual or possible relations to the things or persons of this present world, nothing to do, that he should simply seek moral and spiritual equipment, through fellowship with God, in order that he may be fully ready to meet, with moral triumph, whatever the future may bring? Most future events either are pre-determined or will be determined by free agents over whom we have no possible control; except for what is accomplished, immediately or ultimately, by our own will, the future will not be different, so far as we can say with rational confidence, from what it would have been, by reason of our prayer or our failure to pray. An English novelist has recently expressed the conviction that, as a result of the present war, we shall retain only the ethic of Christianity, giving up its distinctly religious elements. Such is not the meaning of this refusal to seek, directly, through prayer, deliverance from physical "evil." Dependence upon God for strength to meet physical evil with courage and patience becomes

all the more urgent, if one deliberately refrains from praying for direct physical interventions on the part of God, because he deems it irrational to do so.

But if the words and deeds ascribed to Jesus suggest that unconditional prayer for merely relative values is morally wrong, they teach even more emphatically that *prayer for personal moral values, which we know to be absolute*, not only may, but, to be properly effectual, *must be unconditional*. The publican in the parable prayed for mercy, and the mercy he obtained was *moral* mercy, righteousness, sufficient for his "justification." "Good gifts"—in short, "the Holy Spirit," God himself—this is what is given in response to true religious dependence. Indeed this is how Jesus came to be more divine than others; not that he was born without a human father, but that he so found the way to the divine Father, in the life of prayer for moral values, that God gave himself to him more abundantly than to others.

And this greatest of gifts, the Holy Spirit, like the midnight gift of loaves to the needy neighbor, is given by God to man, "not because he is his friend," exactly, but only on condition of persistently seeking it in religious dependence. Importunity, like that of the widow seeking justice is indispensable in seeking, through religious adjustment, the promotion of the absolute values of a thoroughly moral will and character. Men ought to pray (not to say prayers, merely) "always," perseveringly, and "not faint," or grow discouraged and give up when on the very verge of attaining to experiences which can come by prayer alone. Such

prayer, when intelligent and absolutely sincere, and continued "without ceasing," i.e., without giving up in discouragement, is as sure to succeed as any process the scientist can describe. It is *universally* answered. "*Everyone that asketh receiveth.*" Thus while science may reduce the *number* of our petitions, the scientific attitude carried into religion will ultimately serve only rationally to direct and intensify our prayer for moral uplift, giving us added assurance that such dependence upon the immanent divine spirit cannot be in vain.

And with regard to the intercession, the all-comprehensive prayer, which is, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done," can *really* be prayed only by being so made the soul's sincere desire that the prayer is simply the inside of the life; the life, the outside of the prayer. When prayer is made thoroughly moral, it will be neither more nor less than *moral religion*.

Finally, that essential Christianity is religion made moral is evidenced by the nature of the *Christian hope of eternal life*. The heaven that men have spontaneously hoped for has always been the pursuit of favorite or ideal activities under ideal conditions. The Egyptian looked forward to farming a river valley under ideal conditions; the heavenly Nile never failed to overflow, nor abundant harvests to ripen in due season. The ancient Teuton expected a continual round of eating, drinking, and fighting, under conditions so ideal that wounds would heal so rapidly that the fighting could be resumed without serious interruption. The North American's paradise was the happy hunting-

ground. And so, in Christianity at its best, as moral religion, a future life is looked upon as an opportunity for further spiritual development and further moral service. It does not surprise us that Jesus, with his supreme confidence in the moral perfection of the divine Father and in his own divine mission, should have coupled with his anticipation of death a confident prediction of his triumph over all that death could inflict upon him. The continuation of his personal existence in a future life was morally imperative, and therefore to be prayed for without hesitation and with full assurance, as for an absolute value.

Not only is it moral to pray (i.e., to depend upon God, absolutely) for a future life, if we sincerely desire it for a moral purpose. It may even be morally demanded of a World-Ruler, for ourselves and for others, if our will and their wills are, or can be reasonably expected to become, moral and a means of promoting any absolute value. Moreover, it is not fully moral for man *not* to desire and even to demand further life and opportunity for moral action, here, or else hereafter; hereafter, if not here.

One may easily be selfish and immoral in his desire for immortality; but no one can be fully Christian, or fully moral, and not desire an immortality of moral service. And in view of the Christian idea of God, the person who thus morally desires and demands a future life has a right to expect, and even to be assured, that this moral prayer for deliverance from the evil of annihilation will be answered. He will be given personal immortality, unless something else would serve quite as well the end he morally wills; and we are unable to conceive anything else that could. It strengthens this assurance, too, to remember that he who, of all the sons of men, sounded the deepest depths of moral personal religion was assured that God was the perfect Father, who would not suffer the moral personality of any of his human children to pass into nothingness.

If it is true that essential Christianity is religion made truly moral, as well as morality made truly religious, then essential Christianity is "absolute religion," the religion of the future, the final faith of humanity.